

Nature as Symbol

Excerpted from *Who Is the Earth? How to See God in the Natural World* by Charles Upton

A symbol is something that stands for something else—not one that is arbitrarily chosen, as if apples were randomly chosen to stand for oranges, but something that has an organic connection to the thing symbolized. A symbol is a partial emanation of a higher, more integrated, more meaningful reality into a lower, less integrated, less meaningful world—which means that “creation” and “symbol-formation” are synonymous on all levels, from the writing of the text you are presently reading to the creation of universe. In the stunningly succinct words of René Guénon, “the effect is a symbol of the cause”, since, in the words of William Blake, “every material effect has a spiritual cause.” So all material forms symbolize higher spiritual realities—and this is especially true of virgin nature before humanity has interfered with it; of revealed sacred texts, such as the Vedas, the Torah and the Qur’an; of sacred art like the icon, the gothic cathedral, the traditional mosque or the Zen garden; and, to a lesser degree, of the traditional crafts. In all these forms, the symbol is a transparent manifestation of the reality symbolized.

As for other man-made objects and environments, they also symbolize spiritual realities, but realities of a lower order, often even a demonic one. Ugly office buildings, ostentatious advertisements, frivolous or degraded consumer products violate the human form as much as they pollute the natural environment. Symbols they are, because there is nothing that is not, but in a sense they are like “symbols with an ego”, designed to agitate or freeze the feelings, manipulate and darken the mind.

On the other hand, most undegenerate primitive or even pre-capitalist craft objects have an almost sacramental quality, because practical function has not yet been divorced from symbolic form. The products of such craftsmanship are at once useful tools, works of art, and ritual objects—this last because the symbolic meaning of the necessary actions of daily life has not yet been obscured. And the archetypes of most pre-industrial craft objects are to be found in Virgin Nature: plate, knife, net, basket, spear are leaf, sharp rock, bird’s nest, spider’s web, deer’s antler. And all such natural forms and species are known, in spiritually-centered, traditional cultures, as ‘words’ of the Creator.

Traditional humanity reads nature like a book, knowing it as God’s original scripture; and this is nowhere more explicit than in the early Fathers of the Church:

As for those who are far from God. . . . God has made it possible to come near to the knowledge of him and his love for them through the medium of creatures. These he has produced, as the letters of the alphabet, so to speak, by his power and his wisdom. . . . (Evagrius of Pontus)

And:

[The Logos], while hiding himself for our benefit in a mysterious way, in the *logoi*, shows himself to our minds to the extent of our ability to understand, through visible objects which act like letters of the alphabet, whole and complete both individually and when related together. (Maximos the Confessor).

This parallel between nature and scripture is so complete that Origen was able to say:

We must necessarily believe that the person who is asking questions of Nature and the person who is asking questions of the Scriptures are bound to arrive at the same conclusions.

And if the natural world is a book, then a holy book may in some sense be the world of nature transposed to a different level. Thus a sacred text, rich with natural symbols, allows a kind of dialogue between nature and human language, in which the inspired consciousness of humanity is a world in the form of a book, and nature, as illuminated by this inspiration, is a book in the form of a world. From the Islamic perspective also, the natural world is a tapestry woven with the “signs” of the Creator—the Arabic word for “signs”, *ayat*, being the same one used to denote the “verses” of the Qur’an, thus making the correspondence between nature and scripture explicit. According to the Holy Qur’an:

In your creation and in all the beasts scattered on the earth there are signs for people of true faith. In the alternation of night and day, and in the provision which Allah sendeth down from the heavens whereby he quickeneth the earth after its death, and in the distribution of the winds, are signs for people who are intelligent (Q. 45:4–6).

And:

Truly the creation of the heavens and of the earth, and the succession of night and day, and in the ships which speed through the sea with what is useful to man, and in the waters which Allah sendeth down from the heavens . . . and in the order of the winds, and the clouds that run their appointed courses between heaven and earth, are signs indeed for people who are intelligent (Q. 2:164).

The Judeo-Christian expression of the same doctrine can be found in Origen:

The apostle Paul teaches us that God’s “invisible nature” has been “clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20): what is not seen is perceived in what is seen. He shows us that this visible world contains teachings about the invisible world, and that this earth includes certain “images of celestial realities” . . . It could even be that God who made the human race “in His own image and likeness” (Genesis 1:27) also gave to other creatures a likeness to certain celestial realities. Perhaps this resemblance is so detailed that even the grain of mustard seed, “the smallest of seeds” (Matthew 13:31), has its counterpart in the kingdom of heaven. If so, by that law of nature that makes it the smallest of seeds and yet capable of becoming larger than all the others and capable of sheltering in its branches the birds of the air, it would represent for us not a particular celestial reality but the kingdom of heaven as a whole. In this sense it is possible that other seeds of the earth likewise contain an analogy with celestial objects and are a sign of them. And if that is true for seeds it must be the same for plants. And if it is true for plants it cannot be otherwise for animals, birds, reptiles and four-footed beasts. . . . It may be granted that these creatures, seeds, plants, roots and animals, are undoubtedly at the service of humanity’s physical needs. However, they include the shape and image of the invisible world, and they also have the task of elevating the soul and guiding it to the contemplation of celestial objects. Perhaps that is what the spokesman of Divine Wisdom means when he expresses himself in the words: “It is he who gave me unerring knowledge of what exists, to know the structure of the world and the activity of the elements: the beginning and end and middle of times, the alternations of the solstices and the changes of the seasons, the cycles of the year and the constellations of the stars, the natures of animals and the tempers of wild beasts, the powers of spirits and the reasonings of men, the varieties of plants and virtues of roots; I learned both what is secret and what is manifest” (Wisdom 7:17–21). He shows thus, without any possible doubt, that everything that is seen is related to something hidden. That is to say that each visible reality is a symbol, and refers to an invisible reality to which it is related.

So every visible form is a sign of God; or, to say it another way, a name. My name is me, and not me; it is me in the vibrating air, in the ear and mind of another. When you've talked with a stranger long enough to ask him his name, and he has in fact pronounced that name, the sound "John" reverberates from your inner hearing back to the face and form of the one who is now "John". It illuminates him; gives him depth; makes him realer to you—realer even to himself. In just this way, the forms of Virgin Nature are words spoken by God; and since That One is the only Reality, every word God speaks is necessarily one of That One's names—names like you, and me, and that shrieking bluejay, and the rising Sun. Since God is the only Reality, all things symbolize Him—and these symbols are unveiled at the moment when human consciousness encounters the world as it really is, with no intervening ego to separate them, since God is Lord equally over the object perceived and the subject perceiving it. As it says in the Qur'an:

We shall show them our signs on the horizons and within themselves until they are assured that this is the truth. Doth not thy Lord suffice thee, since he is over all things the Witness? (Q. 41:53)

To cultivate a vision of Virgin Nature as a tapestry of symbols, as the Creator's first book in which every form is a letter, every sentient being word, and every vital process a chapter, you must in a sense become profoundly naive; you must be guileless and simple-minded enough to know the kind of innocence which comes after experience, not before it. The following question is an exercise in this extremely sophisticated form of simple-mindedness, the answer to which only seems complicated after it has been put into words:

Q: Why is the sky blue?

The scientific answer to this question involves the various wavelengths of radiant energy within sunlight, the gaseous composition of the atmosphere, the laws of refraction, etc. But the metaphysical answer is: Because there is a higher world known as the angelic plane—in Sufi terms, the *malakut*—one of the earlier reflections of the Divine Nature, where all is high, cool, serene and clear, where perception is pristine and limpid, free from the agitation of discursive thought, where separate objects—like birds, the Sun, and the daytime Moon—are perfect expressions of their enveloping matrix, which is the essence of clear perception, the essence of Air. Given that this higher world exists in a relative eternity 'previous' to our experience of time, and that all realities radiate their particular qualities, reflection upon reflection, into ever more constricted and literal worlds, then that angelic world must, through a series of spiritual, psychic, subtle material, and finally physical processes, ultimately reveal itself to our physical eyes as the luminous, blue, overarching daytime sky.

The scientific answer to "why is the sky blue?" is not "wrong"; it's simply that it deals only with the solidified and already-decaying surface of things. And so to apply it to questions of ultimate origin is irrelevant, a fundamental mistake. As far as the ultimate nature of blue sky is concerned, the vision of a child who has been taught more in terms of religious than of scientific myth, who sees the beautiful, soft blue sky with its floating white clouds as 'heaven, the place where the angels live', is closer to the truth than the vision of the astronomer or meteorologist. (William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* were written to demonstrate precisely this.)

Using this same way of looking at things, we can answer other questions about the inner reality of nature:

Q: Why is the Sun hot, bright and radiant?

A: Because the Divine Intellect is a synthesis of Love (heat) and Knowledge (light), with absolutely no distinction between them, since to know God is to love Him, and to love Him is to know Him—and because God's Self-knowledge must necessarily radiate and illuminate all creatures, since those creatures are nothing in essence but particular forms of that Self-knowledge. As Dionysius the Areopagite says:

What praise is not demanded by the blaze of the sun? For it is from the Good that its light comes, and it is itself an image of the Good. . . . I am certainly not asserting in the manner of the ancients that the sun actually governs the visible world as god and maker of the universe. But since the creation of the world, the invisible mysteries of God, thanks to his eternal power and godhead, are grasped by the intellect through the creatures.

Q: Why do trees branch?

A: Because, quickened by the sunlight of the Divine Intellect, the receptive Divine Substance that the Hindus call *Prakriti*—hidden, like the roots of a tree, in the undifferentiation of its own nature—rises into manifestation, and ramifies, until it bursts into leaf and flower as the ‘ten thousand things’, all the forms of the visible universe.

Q: Why are eagles as they are?

A: Because the consciousness of creatures naturally aspires to rise and unite itself with the radiant Intellect that created it, like an eagle soaring into the Sun; and because inspiration from that Intellect descends upon creatures when and how it will, swiftly and unerringly, and assimilates them to its higher truth, as an eagle dives to devour its prey.

Q: Why are deer as they are?

A: Because the Divine Nature is filled with subtle, elusive energies by which God intuits the qualities of His own potential manifestation while they are still tender and embryonic, like deer sampling young weeds and spring grasses.

Q: Why does rain fall and water run down hill? And why does water evaporated by the Sun disappear?

A: Because the life-giving Truth of which the universe is made naturally descends the hierarchy of being from Source to manifestation in an increasingly visible manner, just as human creativity moves from cloudy intimation through clear conception to completed act, while the return of manifestation to its invisible Source, under the influence of Divine guidance, must, as it progresses, become less and less visible to outer eyes.

The word *maya* is related to the Sanskrit root meaning “to measure”. The scientific worldview, based on measurement, ultimately draws us further into illusion, since it shows us the world not as it actually appears, but only an edited version, the world as we judge it to be based on thought and experiment. Symbolic consciousness, on the other hand, teaches us to see, again, the world as it actually appears to the full range of our perception. We are taught in school that ancient man believed, erroneously, that the Sun orbits the Earth, whereas the truth is that the Earth orbits the Sun. Ptolemy was wrong; Copernicus was right. But one of the implications of Einstein’s theory of relativity is that the Earth’s-eye view of the motion of the heavenly bodies and the Sun’s-eye view are equally arbitrary, therefore equally valid. Why call one ‘true’ and the other ‘false’? It all depends upon your point-of-view. However, in reality, neither view is arbitrary, since each has its own particular symbolic meaning. The heliocentric view demonstrates how the entire realm of manifestation—the “Earth”—is contingent upon, a “satellite” of, the eternally-creative Divine Intellect. But the geocentric view is, if anything, even more richly symbolic, precisely because the point-of view is that of the human eye itself—a Sun’s-eye view being possible only in the abstract because no human eye can exist on the Sun. Speaking in terms of effective symbolism, the way the cosmos actually manifests to our senses is the way it most truly is, since the more concrete our perception is, the richer it is in symbols addressed directly to us and “speaking to our condition”. This is the famous

correspondence between Macrocosm and Microcosm, of which Jung's theory of "synchronicity" is a faint and flickering shadow.

Quantitative data bind our perception to their own level, which is the outer surface of things, at once material and abstract. Symbols, being both concrete and transparent, lead our perception beyond the symbolic level, all the way to the Thing Itself. As Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 140–c.220) says:

By meditation....we are no longer considering the physical properties of an object, its dimensions, its thickness, length or breadth. What is left from now on is only a sign, a unity. . . .

Symbolic consciousness purifies the senses by breaking our attachment to sense-objects. It does so by transforming these objects from material facts into *truths*. It is possible to possess material objects or facts; it is impossible to possess truths, since they, of necessity, possess us. Blake: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite." Contemplating the forms of the world as symbols, we contemplate God—but we need always to remember that God is more than an Object to be looked at: He is looking too—and since, in simple truth, That One is the Only Being, our contemplation of Him is actually His contemplation of Himself. As Maximos the Confessor says:

If invisible things are seen by means of the visible, the visible things are perceived in far greater measure through the invisible by those who devote themselves to contemplation. For the symbolic contemplation of spiritual things by means of the visible is nothing other than the understanding in the Spirit of visible things by means of the invisible.

Or, in the words of Meister Eckhart:

The eye through which I see God, and the eye through which God sees me, are the same eye.

[NOTE: Among Sophia Perennis titles that deal with spiritual ecology are *Look to the Land* and *Looking Back on Progress* by Lord Northbourne; *Mining, Metalurgy and the Meaning of Life* by Roger Sworder; *Primordial Alchemy* by Rodney Blackhirst; and *Who is the Earth? How to See God in the Natural World*.]